The United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons: A Progress Report

In 1982 the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons was adopted by the General Assembly. At the same time the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons was proclaimed to assist policy makers, planners, legislators and others to adopt enlightened disability policies and to provide a timeframe for the initial implementation of the World Programme of Action.

A new approach to disability

The first evaluation of the World Programme's implementation was made by UNOV/CSDHA at the mid-point of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons, and was endorsed by a global meeting of experts, consisting largely of disabled persons, in Stockholm in 1987. This expert meeting acknowledged that the World Programme of Action offered a new approach and had increased understanding of disability by redefining the issues in a human-rights context and by recommending practical measures aimed at self-determination and equalization. With its framework of prevention, rehabilitation and equalization of opportunities, the Programme opened the way to a future in which disabled people may participate fully in society, foremost as citizens with equal rights and obligations.

Signs of increase in disability

Despite the progress some countries made in the areas of health and rehabilitation, the number of disabled persons has increased over the course of the Decade, especially in war stricken areas and those affected by famine. Between 6 and 10 per cent of the world population (i.e., around 500 million people) have been identified as having one or more disabilities. Approximately 160 million are women and another 140 million children.

It is estimated that 300 million people with disabilities live in developing countries and that only 1 per cent of these have access to basic health, education and adequate sanitation services. With currently escalating population growth rates, poverty, accidents and armed conflicts, these figures will increase in the years to come.

In 1987, the Stockholm meeting of experts noted that, despite achievements in the area of prevention, progress had been slow, particularly in developing countries which are facing economic and social difficulties. However, at the international, regional and national levels, new policies and programmes have emerged throughout the Decade, aimed at alleviating this situation. The General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and other international bodies adopted a variety of declarations and resolutions calling for comprehensive measures addressing disability issues. In this last year of the Decade, 1992, it is appropriate that we examine what was achieved, the shortcomings, and the challenges that lie ahead.

Increased awareness and understanding

Prejudice and discrimination result from social, economic and cultural factors. There are indications that the International Year of Disabled Persons—1981 (IYDP) and the World Programme of Action provided valuable assistance to those seeking to overcome prejudice and improve the status of disabled persons. Undoubtedly, the major achievement of the Decade was increased public awareness of disability issues among policy makers, planners, politicians, service providers, parents and disabled persons themselves.

Public awareness campaigns at the national level were undertaken in many countries and included intensive media and public education programmes, as well as national events and commem-

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orative days and weeks focusing on people with disabilities. These activities have actually helped to achieve positive changes in attitude among the general public. People have become aware that it is the responsibility of society to remove barriers and obstacles to full participation.

Coordination for growth and stability

During the last ten years, many Governments, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and organizations of disabled persons began formulating disability policies and sought to better coordinate their programmes. Unfortunately, however, many national coordinating committees established during IYDP were disbanded at the end of the Year.

Since 1988 national coordinating mechanisms have been seen as essential for policy development and implementation. However, the organizational structure of these mechanisms and the range of responsibilities assumed by them have been generally inadequate. Accordingly, in 1990, a United Nations meeting in Beijing produced guidelines for establishing and developing national coordinating committees on disability, or similar bodies, as a priority for effective national coordination.

By assisting countries to define and strengthen the role of national coordinating mechanisms, the United Nations hopes to further build on the momentum gained during the Decade and to inspire effective measures for the realization of full participation of disabled persons.

Organizations for larger gains

The growth and development of organizations of disabled persons is an area where great strides have been made during the Decade. Disabled people, through their organizations, have been able to increase their influence, gain the respect of their communities and achieve greater independence and access to community resources. Despite these gains, the resource base of these organizations is weak, which makes them very vulnerable in periods of recession.

While there has been an increase in the participation of disabled persons in different sectors of society, disabled people are not yet an integral part of the decision-making process at national and international levels. With the guiding philosophy shifting away from a charity approach towards the empowerment of disabled persons, efforts to promote the growth and impact of organizations of disabled persons should be stepped up worldwide.

Sharing information and data

Since IYDP and the beginning of the Decade, basic knowledge about disability has grown considerably and the flow of information on disability issues has increased, particularly in industrialized countries. Through the mass media, the general public participated in discussions, debates and information programmes, while data bases on disability issues are being set up in several countries. At the national level, disability issues are being included in censuses and household surveys, and statistical information on disability, which in 1960 was available in only 15 countries, is now available in over 55. Several European countries have set up an extensive computerized information network as part of the European Community's efforts to share disability-related information.

In many countries, however, specific and up-to-date data are often inadequate. Differences in definitions within and among countries, the technical shortcomings of censuses and surveys, and particular social attitudes make it difficult to establish reliable data and research and provide a weak basis for policy formulation and service planning. To redress this situation, many countries would need to establish and publish national data bases which would provide more reliable information for policy makers and planners. In this connection, the United Nations is assisting developing countries in compiling and using national disability statistics and in exchanging relevant information and data with other countries and organizations. It is essential that this information should be presented in accessible formats to facilitate the exchange of information among those with impairments.

Human Resource Development: Education, training and employment

Realizing the importance of achieving the autonomy and independence of disabled persons, many countries reported special measures and arrangements

for education and training. Unfortunately, cultural and environmental barriers often form the main obstacles to the further development of people with disabilities. Nevertheless, human resource development through special programmes for education, training and employment has helped disabled persons overcome these barriers in many countries, while mainstreaming and integration in both education and employment remained the main focus.

Education at primary and secondary levels has been made available to disabled persons in many countries, either through special schools or within mainstream educational or vocational training programmes. However, education at higher levels is often not provided, and there is a great disparity between educational facilities available in developed and developing countries.

Although content and quality of education and training should ensure that the skills acquired provide opportunities for work and independent living, in many countries this is not the case. In regard to employment, many countries realized the need to promote policies for affirmative action based on the right of disabled persons to employment and training on equal terms in the regular labour force. In addition to formal employment, self-employment and income-generating schemes have been created in developing countries. Yet environmental barriers in many workplaces make them inaccessible to disabled persons, while employers often fail to appreciate the potential of disabled workers.

The International Labour Organisation reports that unemployment among disabled persons is two to three times higher than for other persons, and still higher in developing countries. Because of a lack of education and training, disabled persons are often employed in low-level positions. Discrimination in a decreasing job market often forces them to accept positions much lower than their qualifications or abilities merit. Disabled women, disabled migrant workers and disabled refugees are especially disadvantaged in the job market, as they are a silent minority without effective pressure groups. In the years ahead these issues would require urgent attention of Governments, NGOs and organizations of disabled persons.

Assistance by the international community

Several international bodies and organizations of the United Nations system have prepared guidelines and manuals on key disability issues, with innovative approaches. However, these guidelines have neither been adequately incorporated in national programmes nor fully applied in the provision of services to disabled persons in the majority of countries. Many developing countries do not have a comprehensive plan or programme within the context of the World Programme of Action, while many disability programmes are still separated from overall development planning.

Repeated calls were made during the Decade for a new international instrument, e.g., standard rules on the equalization of opportunities for disabled persons and a long-term strategy, in order to make the recommendations of the World Programme of Action more operational. Accordingly, ECOSOC's first regular session in 1990 authorized the Commission for Social Development to establish a Working Group to elaborate the Standard Rules.

A new decade of change

While much has been achieved over the Decade, it is obvious that the goal of full and equal participation is far from being realized. In most developing countries, there has been a lack of comprehensive planning, while insufficient funding reflects the low priority given to disability issues. However, equalization of opportunity is an ideal towards which all nations must strive.

The year 1992 marks the end of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons, a period which has laid the foundations for further development. This year should be used as a transition point to take stock of what we have learned over the Decade and put into practice new approaches. Now is the time to build upon the awareness raised throughout the decade and turn this into comprehensive disability programmes to further integrate disabled persons into society.

In 1990 the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to shift the focus of the United Nations disability programme away from awareness-raising towards action, with the aim of creating

a society for all by the year 2010. A society for all seeks the full and equal participation of all its members—regardless of their sex, age, race or disability. In order to reach this goal, the United Nations Secretariat is currently preparing a long-term strategy to assist Member States to implement the World Programme of Action beyond the Decade.

A United Nations Expert Group Meeting was convened in Vancouver (25-29 April 1992) to work out a long-term strategy to further the implementation of the World Programme of Action to the year 2000 and beyond and to develop sustainable action plans. The report of the meeting will be circulated for comments and a draft strategy document, "Towards a Society for All—From Awareness to Action", will be forwarded to the Commission for Social Development in February 1993 and submitted to the General Assembly at its 48th session.

Through the strategy, the United Nations is reaffirming its commitment to provide a framework and infrastructure for the effective implementation of the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Disabled Persons. This long-term plan should also help Governments and organizations to develop national action plans for the period 1993-2002, encompassing priorities to be set to equalize opportunities and support independent living.

Commitment through spending

A consensus has developed that social development programmes cost money. There are clear indications that financial limitations constitute a major obstacle in implementing the goals of the World Programme of Action. While the proportions of total government expenditures to GNP increased in most developed and developing countries between 1972 and 1981, expenditures related to disability did not increase proportionately. It is estimated that, in the mid-1980s, real per capita spending on health and education in many developing countries was one quarter to one half of their levels a decade earlier.

Deep reductions in real social expenditures reflected the constraints of the time and policy changes due to world-wide economic and financial trends. In order to sustain development at the national level it is essential that substantially increased resources be devoted to the task.

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